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ABSTRACT

The vast majority of American Indian students are educated in public school districts controlled by locally elected school boards. If Indian parents are to influence the education of their children they must become knowledgeable in political methods of influencing local school boards. The process of Indian influence in educational decisions was studied in two public school districts with sizable Indian populations and one non-public Indian controlled school on the Coeur d'Alene Reservation in Idaho. Data were collected during the six months prior to May 1977 through direct observation, document analysis, and informant interviews. While each of the three boards exhibited different styles of governance in response to influences existing in the community, the decisions of all the boards were mostly unanimous. Although all appeared to want to solicit more parent-community involvement, the level of community interest was not high. Discrimination existed between Indian and non-Indian. Findings indicated that the Indian community's influence on the public school board was only as strong as its direct relationship and interaction with officials in the district. Unless an Indian was a member of a school board or the tribal council, he had little influence on educational decision making. Recommendations included instructing school boards how to proceed in representing the total community. (NEC)

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THE PROCESS OF NATIVE AMERICAN INFLUENCE ON THE EDUCATION OF NATIVE AMERICAN CHILDREN

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THE PROCESS OF NATIVE AMERICAN INFLUENCE ON THE EDUCATION OF NATIVE AMERICAN CHILDREN

Introduction

The vast majority of Native American students are educated not in B.I.A. controlled schools but in public school districts controlled by locally elected school boards (National Advisory Council Report, 1975). Thus if Native Americans are to influence the education of their children, they must become knowledgeable in the political methods of influencing local school boards in addition to their efforts in affecting B.I.A. decisions. For years investigators of the condition of Indian education have recommended that the basic solution of many of the problems was to develop more involvement of Indian parents in the educational process of their children (see McKinley, 1979; Brightman, 1974; Havighurst, 1970).

The purpose of this research was to describe and conceptually account for the process of Native American influence in educational decisions on the Coeur d'Alene reservation in Idaho

Conceptual Framework

The Sacred-Secular continuum developed by Becker (1950) and later used by Iannaccone and Lutz (1970) to analyze local school board behaviors was used in this study to describe and account for the nature of the communities and their values. The concepts of elite-arena council behavior suggested by Bailey (1965) and later used by Lutz and Iannoccone (1979) to analyze the governance behavior of local school boards was used to analyze the

decision making processes of the local districts. These were combined suggesting that the more sacred a community and the more homogeneous the society, the more the community would display and be satisfied with elite council behavior. The more secular the community, the more heterogeneous the society the more the community would display and be satisfied with arena council behavior.

Using these models and literature about Native American schools the following tentative assumptions were devised to guide data collection and against which the data were analyzed:

1. Public school boards are not influenced by the Native American community in the boards' decision making policies.
2. Indian-controlled school boards are influenced by the Native American community in the boards' decision making policies.
3. Influence in educational decision making will be differentially distributed among the Native American community.
4. The culture and religion of the Native American community is likely to be a factor in influencing educational board decision making on the reservation.

Method

Data were collected and observations made over a six month period, December 1976 and May 1977. Two public school districts with sizable Indian populations and one non-public Indian contracted school board were observed. The data were collected by direct observation, document analysis, and informant interviews. The interview questions were verbal and open-ended. They were guided but unstructured to allow those interviewed an opportunity to contribute as much as possible. In addition, no time limit was imposed in order to allow for a complete answering of the questions. Those interviewed included school board members, Johnson

O'Malley advisory board members, tribal education committee members, tribal leaders, and school administration personnel. The interview focused on the decision making process in the schools on the reservation and how those interviewed perceived when and under what conditions decisions are made.

The interview covered the following areas of interest:

1. Who makes the decisions in school governance?
2. Whose interests are being served and under what conditions?
3. Are the school boards influenced by the majority or a select few?
4. What are the influences that regulate control and power within the system?
5. What is the process of influence and under what conditions?

Data

Depending on the issues, boards may exhibit different decision making behavior at different times. For example, it had been the practice when there was a problem in purchasing additional land for school construction the process of "eminent domain" may be put into force. In not being able to enforce this practice to acquire Indian land the Pinesville school board had no choice but to enter into negotiations with the Coeur d'Alene Tribal Council. This, in turn, had the effect of shaping the decision making behavior of the school board on that particular issue.

All boards in the study appeared to want to solicit more parent-community involvement. However, the extent of parental involvement did not seem to influence board decision making in any of the three districts. In fact, the Tribal School board did not feel it necessary to involve the non-Indian parents in decisions at the Tribal School.

The decisions of all of the boards were mostly unanimous. In the pre-board meeting sessions held by the typical "Elite" board, it was not clear if these sessions were called in order to seek consensus. This might be a consequence of the session in addition to just "getting the facts" as was mentioned by those intereviewed. Regardless, the tendency of this district to call a great number of executive sessions attests to the fact that the public is excluded a majority of the times when decisions are made.

All the boards studied appeared to be involved in administrative decisions, some more than others. This action is typical of many small town boards. Of the three districts in the study, the Tribal School Board appeared to be the least involved in administrative functions. The Tribal School Board used the expertise of their superintendent in school matters. This could be the result of a lack of long board experience on the part of the Tribal School board. The Woodsville school board appeared to have a positive relationship with their superintendent, while the Pinesville board did not.

Discrimination was found to exist between Indian and non-Indian. One of the reasons was that the Indians had been receiving too many advantages. This conflict is in sharp contrast to the usual situation where the non-Indian person generally is rated superior to the Indian. The resulting concern is that the Coeur d'Alene Tribe now possesses economic stability and may eventually exert political influence over the total Indian and non-Indian reservation population.

In all three districts the level of community interest is not high. The two public school boards had the highest rate of attendance at board meetings. All three school boards did send out agendas and, with the exception of the Tribal School, had regular board meetings and times. The

Tribal School's failure to do so would tend to discourage public attendance at the Tribal School board meetings.

When an Indian was elected to the Pinesville school board there tended to be optimism that this person would represent Native American interests on the school board. However, there is the danger this individual board member will join the school board culture, thus becoming a trustee type representative rather than a delegate representative of the Native American community interests. If this happens the Indian community would have little more representation than they had prior to the election of an Indian school board member. Indian representation on a public school board must represent Indian interests and values and not merely legitimize the same old ignoring of Indian interests.

The elements used in describing and contrasting the Elite and Arena behavior were basically characteristic of the boards studied. The use of the closed meeting by the most Elite public school board and the strong administrative involvement by the other Elitist board are examples of these characteristics. The use of an "alien expert" superintendent, by the Tribal School board to handle administrative school procedures, and open discussion of the issues are characteristic of the Arena board.

In conclusion, the Arena board appeared to be in a position of not having a great deal of authority. With the exception of the chairman, who influenced most of the board's decisions, and the Tribal Council, who had ultimate authority, the other four board members exhibited little influence on decisions. These board members usually followed the lead of the board chairman and the superintendent's recommendations. The fact that the school lacked appropriate norms and guidelines also contributed to this situation.

This condition, at times, resulted in states of "anomie" as identified in other studies.

Conclusions

Each of the three boards studied exhibited different styles of governance in response to influences existing in the community. In the Elite boards the Native American demands were considered as long as the decision did not involve other than Indian funds or advantage the Indians too much. There was a strong tendency to uphold the "guardian of the people" concept while making a decision. These decisions often were not in the best interests of the Native Americans.

There was a definite breakdown in one Elite district in Indian community board representation. As a result in both Elite districts it was not possible to be sure how much representation the Native Americans were receiving. This lack of representation contributed to the establishment of an Indian controlled Tribal School with an Arena school board on the Coeur d'Alene reservation. The change resulted in the educational decisions being made by Indians, but did not necessarily improve community representation. School decisions did involve the Tribal School Board, thus giving rise to additional Indian input. However, ultimate authority is held by the Tribal Council. By the same token, the non-Indians, although invited to participate in school activities, were excluded from the decision making process. This rejection of non-Indian involvement is just as undemocratic as is the rejection of Indian interests on the public school boards. The only non-Indian involved in decisions was the superintendent, who was responsible for running the school and as seen was the "alien expert" employed by the board. As the Arena Tribal School

board becomes more competent in school board matters and more sophisticated in school board behavior, the more confident the board will be in handling conflict. However, as long as the board is under the direction of the Tribal Council, the Tribal School board will not possess the same governing authority afforded to the public schools on the Coeur d'Alene reservation.

In the past the Coeur d'Alene tribe was not in a position to exercise controls on the educational decision making process throughout the reservation. With increased economic prosperity and an increased awareness in exercising political power, the Coeur d'Alene Indians are in a position unique in most reservation communities. It is not feasible or possible for the non-Indian school boards in the community to continue to minimize community influences by ignoring Indian demands. The Native Americans on the Coeur d'Alene reservation are no longer an economically poor, powerless minority group but are now recognized as an economically stable, powerful minority. This situation will continue to make a difference in degree of educational influence exercised by the Native American on the reservation. At least on the Coeur d'Alene reservation Native Americans are now in the position to begin to influence educational decision making.

Based on the models presented, several implications can be stated which may also be used as hypotheses for further research. These are:

1. The Indian community is the sum total of the religious and cultural values that exist on the Coeur d'Alene reservation.

2. When an educational decision is made it becomes a part of that sum total of community values.

3. The Indian community's influence of the public school board is only as strong as its direct relationship and interaction with officials in the district.

4. Unless a Native American is a member of a school board or the tribal council, one has little influence on educational decision making on the Coeur d'Alene reservation.

5. Outsiders perceive little conflict in the Native American community regarding traditional ways versus more progressive means of attaining goals in the usual sense of Indian traditional-progressiveness.

6. Insiders perceive conflict in the Native American community regarding traditional ways versus more progressive means of attaining goals.

7. An arena board without norms or guidelines to handle community values will have conflict and ultimate superintendent turnover as demonstrated by the previous history of the Coeur d'Alene tribal school.

8. As norms and guidelines are implemented there will be less conflict and the board may move from arena to elite behavior.

With respect to Native American influence in educational decision making, a number of additional recommendations are suggested:

1. The Native Americans on the Coeur d'Alene reservation need to learn how to influence education politics. This could be done through training sessions. They need:

   a. To understand their roles and duties as school board members.
   b. To understand the political system and how to use it for the Native American's benefit.
   c. To conduct orientations for school board members and, the community as a whole, so that all will know what to expect from board members.

2. The Tribal School and public school boards need to be instructed how to proceed in representing the total community.

   a. More delegate-arena behavior by board members and boards, representing entire community (Indian and non-Indian interests).
   b. More debate and non-unanimous votes reflecting this type of representation.

3. The JOM parent advisory boards should not depend on the superintendent to represent them at the public school board meetings. JOM advisory boards should establish direct liaison with the public school boards whom they advise.

   a. Someone from the school board on the JOM and/or
   b. Someone from the JOM boards asked by the school board to sit with them in all deliberations (non-voting).

4. Native American education boards need to develop by-laws which establish norms and procedures for the governance of local Indian education programs in schools enrolling Indian students. The by-laws should contain reference to decision making policy, community-school governance procedures, proper staff hiring procedures, and program evaluation.

The explanatory models and assumptions developed from the findings of this study should be considered of a heuristic nature. When using a small sample, such as the one used in this inquiry, one must be careful not to overly generalize the findings. However, these findings can be used as the basis for further investigation in the study of community influences in educational decision making.

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